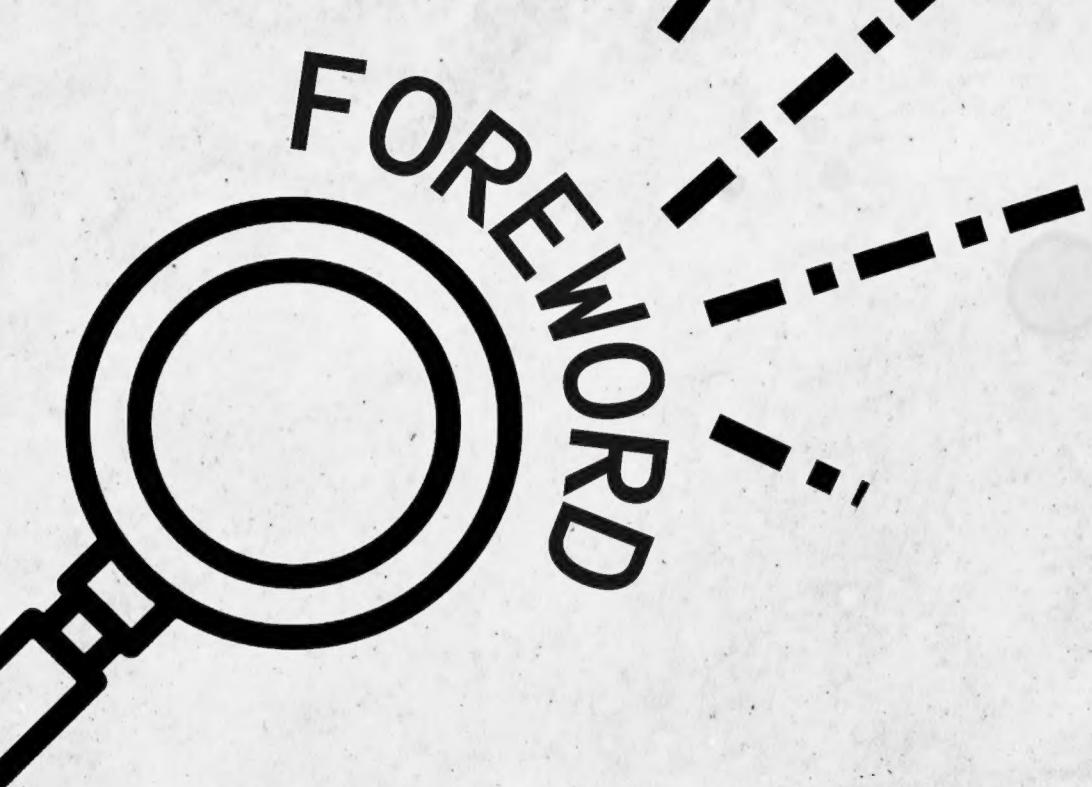




Veiled Identity

@HELL
SCAP3



*"Even if it seems impossible.. just persevere.
but most importantly, follow my lead."*

Hello and thank you for downloading
Veiled Identity, an unofficial
fanzine centered around the
Ultimate Imposter from Danganronpa
2: Goodbye Despair!

This project is a rebirth of a
discontinued imposter zine from as
far back as 2022. So for the fans
that have been waiting since then,
and the contributors who have
worked ever so hard to make this
zine's final release-- we dedicate
these 60+ pages of Super Highschool
Level Ultimate Imposter content to
you!

**CONTENT WARNING: the pieces shown within
this zine are not spoiler-free. Continue at
your own discretion-- thank you.**





Those Summer Days

by Arty

Ryota knew by now where to find Sagishi: Their schedule was rigid, and they made sure to keep everyone else on track too. Still, Mondays were always the least structured day, and with a little softening up, he hoped to convince his partner to join him for the afternoon, to relax for once. He tied his hair, then tugged the band out, retied it, pulled it out again. Would Ishi have a preference, he wondered, staring frustratedly in the mirror. It was only his sixth alarm going off that shook him from his thoughts – that was the last alarm before he had to leave, and if he wasn't at the restaurant on time, Teruteru probably wouldn't be able to hold Sagishi off from finding yet more tasks they could take upon themselves. He resolved to slip his hair tie onto his wrist, grab his nearest sketchbook and pencil, and head off.

In the restaurant, Sagishi was, as usual, pestering Teruteru about something or other, looking like a caricature with their clipboard and fake glasses – though they felt more comfortable now wearing their own skin rather than a disguise,

they had a tendency to slip a little into Togami whenever something important needed to be done. It was probably them lecturing the chef on using more sustainable ingredients, things that could be grown on Jabberwock. After all, no matter how kind Naegi was, they couldn't keep requesting fancy ingredients from the Future Foundation in each shipment. Ryota couldn't help but laugh as Teru laughed awkwardly, trying to dig himself out of the hole he'd buried himself in. Still, he felt bad for his friend, so he wandered over and wrapped his arms around his partner's waist, tucked his face in the crook of their neck. Their hair still smelled of the rose shampoo they'd used at an ungodly hour of the morning, and he hummed amusedly.

'Hey Ryota,' Sagishi still sounded miffed, but the annoyance in their voice drained away with every syllable of their partner's name, 'Sleep well?'

Ryota nodded into their shoulder, before pulling away sheepishly. Teruteru had already snuck off into the kitchen, either to avoid another round of lecturing or to grab the picnic basket he'd been asked to prepare.

'So...' Ryota could hear Teruteru returning,

so he might as well ask now before Sagishi started questioning the presence of the hamper, 'Since you've been so busy working lately, I was wondering if, uh, you might like to, yknow, have lunch with me?' For once in his life Ryota's timing was perfect - Teruteru sauntered in with the picnic hamper and thrust it into his hands.

'Yall go off and have fun, y'ain't saying no to a damn nice date with my cooking on the table,' He was strutting off before the confused look on Ishi's face disappeared, so they turned to Ryota instead.

'Well, are you asking me on a date?' They asked amusedly, the corners of their eyes crinkling in a way that was so uniquely them, not a hint of a costume. In his infatuation, Ryota nearly forgot what he was being asked, and nodded far too late, but his partner only laughed; they were so used to his awkwardness, and yet they never minded.

With that they were off, headed down one of many well-walked paths that lead towards the central island. Ryota insisted on carrying the hamper, not because he wanted to be a 'gentleman', but because it had been his idea to have this date, so he didn't want Sagishi to have to do all the work.

They walked hand in hand, their arms intertwined and swinging, a peaceful blanket of silence in the warm spring air. The island initiative Ishi had led, their effort to improve the islands and make them a home, Ryota was in awe of it every day.

Jabberwock Park no longer housed an ugly statue; Nekomaru and Akane had between the two of them pulled down the original statue of the island guardians and melted it down into scrap within a month of the duo's awakening. In its place, Ryota had designed a statue of Monomi and Chiaki, a dedication to their memory and sacrifice, which stood proudly in the centre of the park. Occasionally the statue was surrounded by offerings of flowers or little handmade trinkets, which Sagishi collected once a week, burying them by Nanami's shrine; it was supposed to be a secret, but Ryota was always awake at whatever early hour his partner chose to sneak out. Getting to share in that secret made Ryota love his partner all the more.

They sat beneath the statue, their deceased friend and robotic supervisor watching peacefully over them. Ryota untied the jacket from his waist and laid it on the grass - it was one of Sagishi's, a soft grey-green like their eyes, and big enough for the both of them to sit on.

The picnic basket before them was left as an afterthought, as Sagishi turned to him.

'This is different,' They said simply, a fond smile on their face, 'You're not usually the one making moves.' Ryota blushed furiously, resisted hiding his face with his bangs, or burying it completely in his hands.

'I just, yknow, wanted to do something nice. For you. You're always doing things for everyone, so I thought maybe...' Even after all these years of recovery,

Ryota was still tripping over his words, but he pushed on, 'You deserve to be spoiled too. Not that, uh, that this really counts, but-'

'Thank you, Ryo,' Sagishi cupped his restless hands in theirs, safe and sturdy as they always were, 'It's very sweet of you to think of me. I appreciate it. I appreciate this.'

Ryota pulled his hands free to wrap them around Sagishi; they melted into the touch as they always did. 'You still deserve good things,' Ryota mumbled in their ear, 'Even if you didn't work so hard on the island every day, even if the world never forgave you, you'd still deserve happiness. I mean it, Ishi, and I wish you knew that,'

In the safety of his partner's embrace he wasn't shy anymore, and he had to tell Sagishi, like he always meant to. He tucked his face into their neck and pecked their cheek.

Sagishi was silent for a moment, still, and Ryota was more than ready to panic again by the time they spoke once more, whispering, 'You're getting sappy,' and chuckling into the crown of their partner's head.

Ryota pulled away smiling, shy, 'We should probably eat, or else Teru will be mad at us,' he said, gently reminding his partner why they were there. While he was more than happy to sit and snuggle, he knew there were bits and pieces in the hamper that would already be going cold. He shuffled over to the basket and tugged it closer to the pair, opening it to reveal Tupperware filled with all Sagishi's favourites - various tender meats that Gundham had raised and... prepared, Teruteru's handcut crisps, a huge platter of the vegetables Mahiru took such pride in growing, and even more things buried underneath. Between the two of them Ryota wasn't sure they'd finish it all, but he knew his partner could always sweet-talk the chef into forgiveness.

They ate in comfortable quiet,

the white noise of insects and the swoosh of soft breeze through tropical leaves muting the silence. To Ryota's surprise, the duo made it through most of the picnic that had been prepared; though really, knowing Sagishi's pride in maintaining their physique, he shouldn't have been shocked at the success.

'Look at this strawberry,' Sagishi seemed to be holding the fruit with an odd kind of reverence, 'Does it remind you of anything?' The fruit in their palm was oddly shaped; instead of the regular single conical peak it had two, and one side had developed slower, leading to it still holding that near-white colour that was often hidden by leaves. It almost looked like a bunny, he thought. Then his eyes widened a little, as he realised what his partner meant, and he smiled fondly.

'Monomi,'

'Nearly a spitting image, right? Well, as much as you could get with fruit, at least,' Ishi was carefully prying away the strawberry's leaves until only two remained, 'It's like she has a bow now. I wonder if she'd like it.'

An artist to his core, Ryota's brain was firing off

with all manner of ideas. Part of him wanted to draw the soft smile on his partner's face as they looked so fondly at this little fruit, a little corner of his mind insisting the serenity of their expression should be cast in bronze for all the world to see, immortalised. But his main thought was far more practical, and, he hoped, would keep the smile on Sagishi's face. They gave him a curious look as he picked up a blackberry and began to separate it with his hands.

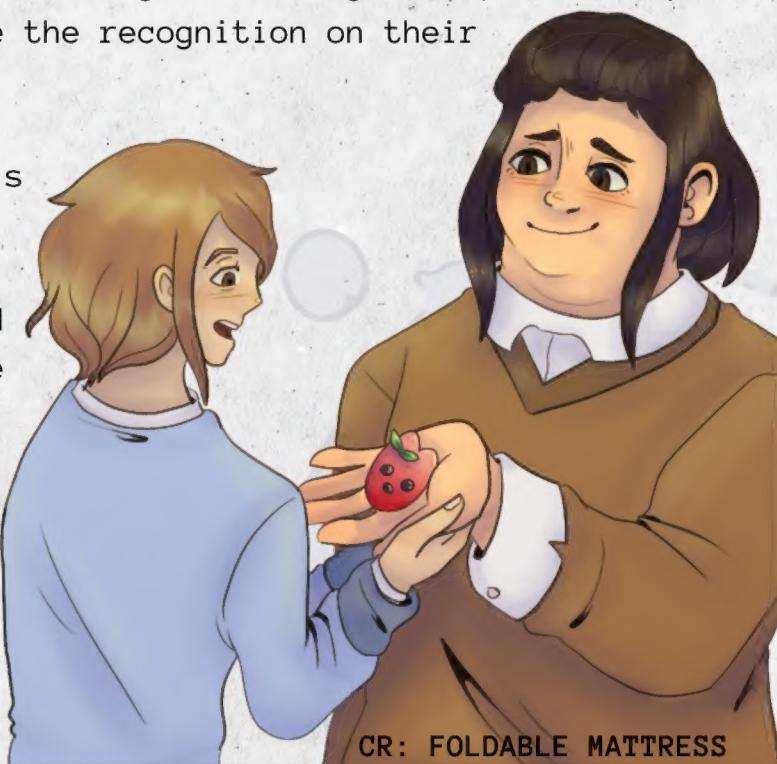
'It'll make sense in a second,' he mumbled, as he was prone to doing in the midst of artistic inspiration. He was pulling apart a raspberry now, for a single little bead of its flesh, but the skin was too soft and burst. 'Hold these for me?' He handed the two tiny pearls of blackcurrant to Sagishi, who accepted them wordlessly. They put up with stranger things, he supposed, especially with being the island leader for a group of former ultimates.

After going through three more raspberries, one complied with him, sparing an intact pearl of red. 'Got it!' He hissed excitedly, and turned to finally catch his partner's gaze again. Sagishi's face hadn't changed, though their eyes now found their focus on him, with the same serenity as before.

'So what have you been making?' Their eyebrow quirked up amusedly as they asked.

'Hold out the strawberry and I'll show you,' Ryota replied. Sagishi stretched out their hand, the strawberry nestled carefully in their palm, and watched intently as Ryota carefully positioned the three beads of berries on the strawberry's surface, struggling a little to keep each piece in its place because of the fruit's curved surface. After far too long spent on designing a strawberry, Ryota cupped his hands around Sagishi's larger one, looked up at them to see the recognition on their face.

'It really is her now,' They said, voice hushed in reverence for this tiny Monomi icon. Sagishi was lost in



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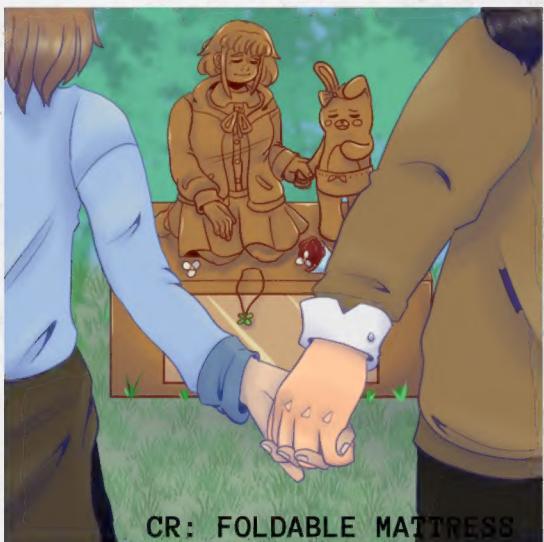
thought, so Ryota grabbed the miniature sketchbook from his back pocket and got to sketching the scene before him. Sagishi had been their muse since before despair, but now, grown up and much happier, more themselves than he'd ever seen them, he couldn't help but doodle all their little expressions, and his sketchbooks were filled with their joy. He'd cherish them forever.

'Wait,' He put his pencil behind his ear as he held Sagishi's hand, tilting it ever so slightly so it was visible alongside the bronze-cast Monomi of the statue. He was back to sketching without a second's hesitation, and when he looked up again his eyes were locked with Ishi's, filled with love, so much that he could practically see those cartoonish heart pupils. He could feel the blush on his cheeks as he smiled, and put the sketchbook down in the grass after only a few more moments of jotting down the scene. He shuffled closer and crawled into Sagishi's lap, and took the makeshift Monomi carefully from their hand so they could move their arm once more.

'We can't eat her, can we?' He asked, head tucked against their chest, 'She's got to stay with the statue, right?'

'Hmm, you're right,' Ishi hummed into his hair,

'We should put her on the pedestal beside your other creations,' They guided his hand up towards the warm bronze plinth, and between the two of them their little creation was laid to rest peacefully at the foot of its life-sized inspiration. With the fruit settled and their hands free, Ryota nuzzled once more into his partner's embrace, with their arms wrapping comfortably around him.

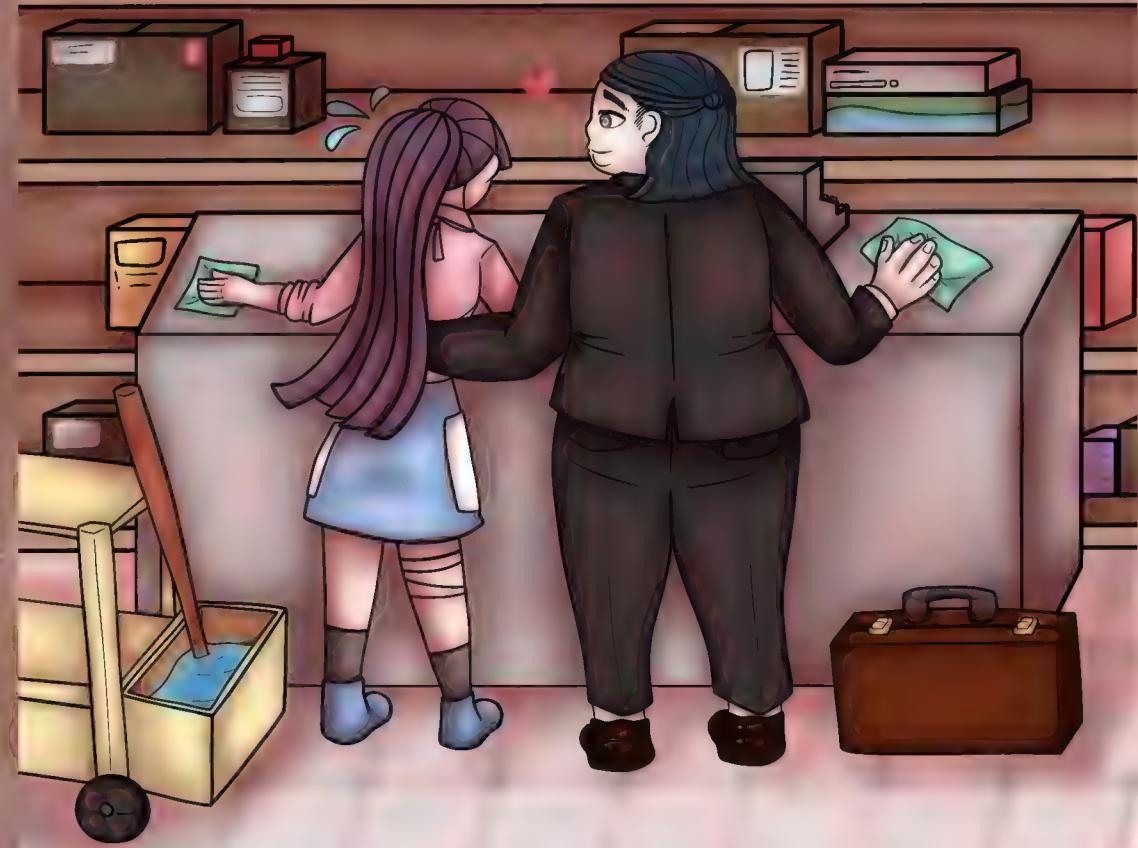


'She'd be proud of us, wouldn't she?' He whispered up at Sagishi. He'd never truly known Chiaki, but he could always sense the kindness she'd held in life radiating from her statue.

'I know she would,' Sagishi uttered back.

Sagishi dozed off after a little while in the warm afternoon sun, and Ryota, trapped by the strength of their embrace, was left to his thoughts. Said thoughts were sappy, of course, as they often are when caught in a lover's arms, and he found himself dwelling on their conversation. He sure hoped that Chiaki would have been proud, especially of how far Sagishi had come - she'd never truly known them either, but surely she'd be able to tell how far they'd come, from leading their ragtag group out of fear and false authority to becoming the beloved leader that the whole island looked up to. It must be exhausting, but everyone could tell that they wouldn't change it for the world. Here on this island, with the freedom and safety to be themselves, Sagishi had had a front-row seat to watching his partner evolve into their own, real self. And he was so grateful, ever thankful for all those blessed coincidences that had saved them, saved him, saved the world, so they could finally live peacefully, as they more than deserved.

Underneath him, Sagishi stirred, sleep-filled eyes landing on him and softening their features. Ryota couldn't help himself as he whispered into his partner's ear, 'We're all so proud of how far you've come.'





The Party Crasher Charms The Security Guard

by Rose

There were two hours until the party. Togami closed the hatch to the duralumin case and ensured it was locked by tugging on the handle. He had acquired the night-vision goggles and crossed them off his mental checklist, knowing he still had more tasks before the deadline. He needed to speak with Hanamura regarding the side dishes and examine the perimeter for a third time to confirm he hadn't missed any blind spots.

He swept his fingers through his hair, blowing out a sigh. He was fortunate to have a moment alone in the hotel lobby. Often, his classmates loafed on the sofas or played billiards, their leisure affirming a sense of normalcy. They were none the wiser, and when he observed them earlier, he couldn't disregard the letter's grave warning implicating anyone.

The envelope grazed his palm when he stuffed his hand into his jacket pocket. He repressed the urge to swallow, knowing it was not like an heir to express apprehension. Raising his head, Togami pivoted from the counter and marched toward the front door.

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“There you are, Byakuya-chan! Found you!”

He drew in a pacifying breath. Over his shoulder, he saw Mioda sprinting toward him from the corridor. She skidded to a stop before him, kicking up the deep blue carpet into his shins. She cradled a particular instrument to her chest, and Togami sensed her question before she could plead her case.

Mioda flashed a toothy grin and spoke a mile a minute. “So! Ibuki knows this is super last minute. You might already have entertainment played for tonight, but—”

“I’m sorry, Mioda, I can’t allow anything that could be considered a weapon at the party,” he interjected with a solitary shake of his head.

She deflated, her shoulders sagging as she cried, “What? Rejection already? That’s ice cold! You didn’t let Ibuki finish her pitch.”

“Because I knew you were going to ask to play for everyone. While your offer is appreciated, I can’t allow anything dangerous inside the venue, including—” Togami gestured at her guitar, noting the long neck and sturdy base.

“—your instrument. It could be used as a blunt weapon.”

Disappointment crept into Mioda’s demeanor as he explained his position. She fidgeted with the strings. Soft echoes of tense sounds strummed between them. Even without speakers, the electrical twanging filled the room.

She gasped, her eyes widening and lips curling. “What if Ibuki holds it tightly? No one will touch it,” she suggested, only to grimace when Byakuya’s scowl deepened. “Uh, Ibuki guesses that idea isn’t good?”

He sighed, his frustration dissipating with his breath. Mioda was a naturally exuberant girl. Her energetic mannerisms matched her eclectic style. She had caught Togami’s eye upon their first meeting. Compared to the often dry and influential people he assumed to get ahead in life, Mioda would’ve been a fascinating subject to imitate. And as Togami apologized for discouraging her, despite it being for her security, he noted how swiftly she rebounded, swapping her pout for a cheek-splitting smile.

“Oh! What if Ibuki gives you a special sneak peek?”

You’ll totally change your mind when you see how proactive Ibuki is,” she claimed, and she shot out her tongue, lunging onto the couch.

She thrust her arm up, a guitar pick nestled between her knuckles. Togami crossed his arms, the case dangling from his fingers. He supposed listening to a single song wouldn’t have been a deterrent. Her spontaneity had earned the attempt to persuade him, even if his decision was set in stone. With a dangerous glint gleaming in her eyes, Mioda hoisted her guitar onto her thigh, jabbed her heel on the armrest, and she jabbed her pick skyward.

“This tune is, ‘The Party Crasher Charms The Security Guard!’,” she exclaimed, and she sucked in a deep breath, filling her chest with so much air that her cheeks took on a faintly red hue.

Togami asked, “Wait. Why is the title-?”

A wave of sound crashed into Togami. Like a whirlwind, the windows clattering, Mioda’s noise captured him. Thunderous, screeching guitar riffs sliced through his sensibility. Her haunting, low voice rumbled.

As if invoking a wicked incantation, Mioda droned her lyrics, her fingers racing along the neck, catching strings on her nails.

The case dropped with his jaw. He swayed, his limbs slack as Mioda shredded. Her deep, dulcet tones lulled him into a strange sense of complacency. His thoughts evaporated, replaced with heavenly heavy music. And when she screamed the roar of a devil emerging from the fiery pits, Togami felt himself swept underneath the pummeling tidal waves of her raging melody.

The final riff reverberated against the quaking windows. She bowed, her long hair flowing over her shoulders. Peeking through her bangs, she asked, "What'd ya think? Kickass, right?"

He remembered to breathe. He coughed and patted his chest, grounding himself. Although a faint headache swelled behind his ears, he cleared his throat. Shivers coursed through him, and he momentarily forgot the person he had assumed.

Togami gestured for her to step off the couch. Mioda bounced into his side, setting her chin on his shoulder with an expectant grin. He spoke evenly.

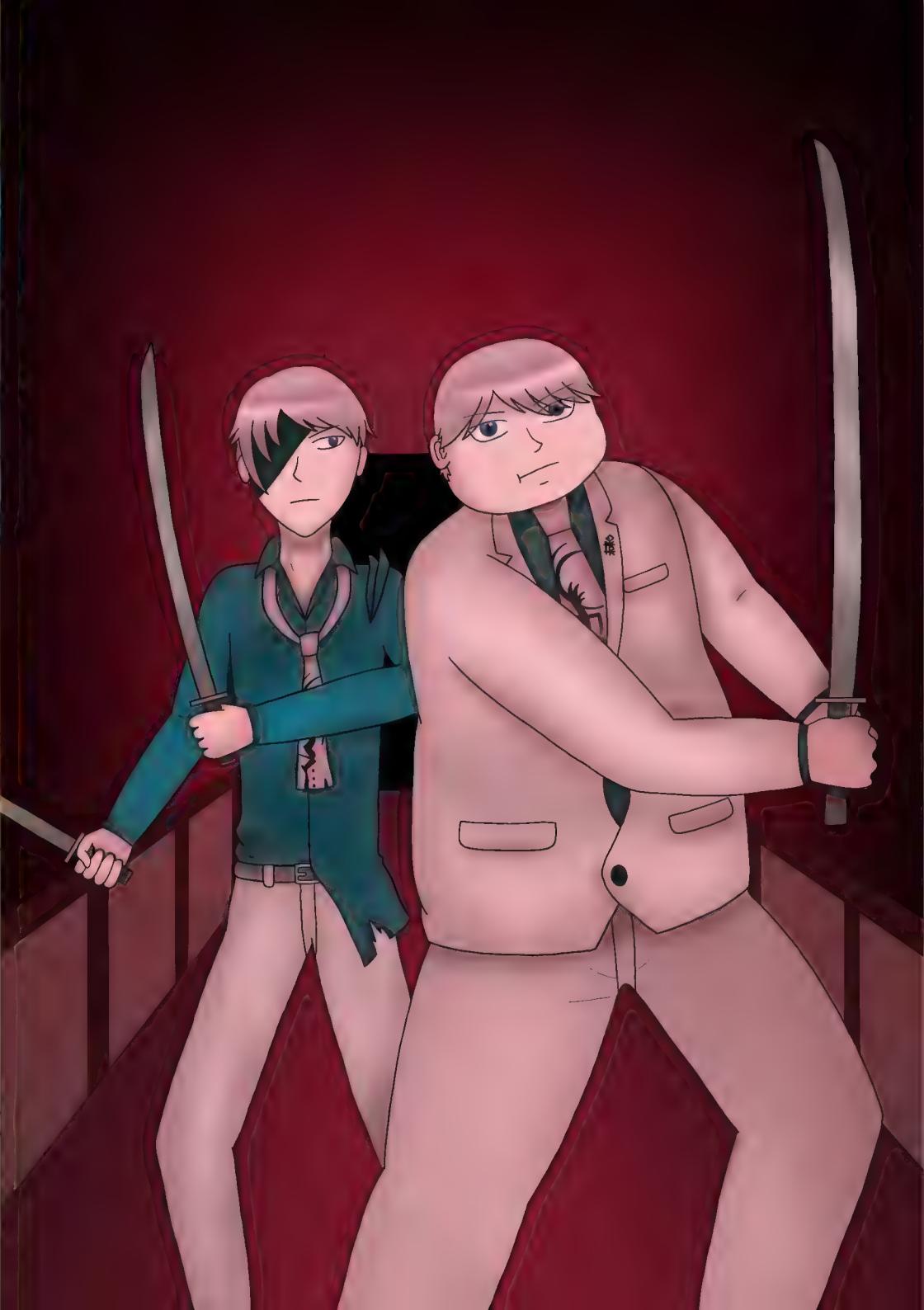
I think your music would be appropriate for our next party."

Despite the brief flicker of dissatisfaction, Mioda hugged her guitar. "Really? Next time? Well, alrighty, Byakuya-chan! It's a promise!"

She held out her pinky finger. Togami stared at her, observing the way her upper teeth gnawed into her lower lip, her joy infectious. It was a one-in-a-million smile, and it was more than worthy of replicating.

A warm smirk pressed into his cheek. He locked his pinky finger around hers, noting the bony knuckle jutting into his palm. On his mental checklist, he added having a proper meal with Mioda. She seemed like the type who would enjoy rich burgers, and as she giggled, shaking their fingers together, he hummed at her amusement.

"Yes, Mioda. It's a promise," he said, hoping it would soon come to pass.





High Expectations

by Tee/Cherry

"The sun really isn't gonna give us a break today, is it?" Mahiru grumbles to herself under her breath, right hand above her brows for a sliver of shade. It's barely effective, but there's not much else she can do.

She sighs, forlorn and slightly irritated at the non-stop heat before crouching down to dig through the cooler once more, the ice water a slight reprieve from the constant lashing of heat against her skin. One by one she fishes out half-frozen water bottles for the others working tirelessly in the warehouse. Truthfully, she can't help but feel a little helpless for being unable to lend a hand with the heavy lifting today, but her chronic pain didn't seem to agree with her this morning.

The second Imposter found out, they'd ordered her to stand by and help with providing refreshments instead of doing work in the warehouse.

It... truthfully hadn't gone over as smoothly in her mind as they might have been expecting

- Mahiru immediately wanting to argue against the order and push through the pain, insisting that she would be able to tolerate it, but a single glance at their expression, the earnest and firm look in their eyes, made all her protests wither away on her lips.

Her gaze goes from the old blue cooler to the others relaying equipment and supplies between themselves. She counts the heads, darting from Kazuichi and Akane to Nekomaru and Hajime to... Imposter, who stood alone at the helm, barking out instructions in a sharp, authoritative tone as the sunlight gleamed off of their pristine white suit. They were Byakuya Togami today, bringing back a flood of memories both good and bad into Mahiru's mind.

But something about them seemed... off.

Mahiru furrowed her eyebrows and stood up, arms cradling five or so water bottles that icily nipped at her skin. But that wasn't important, because the more she focused on them, the more it looked like-

"Imposter!"

She runs as fast as her legs will take her, abandoning the water bottles on the ground.

As soon as she's within their reach, she latches onto their arms, steadyng them upright. "W-what's wrong? Are you alright?"

It's when she's face to face with them that she notices the way they're flushed up to their ears, sweaty and eyes half lidded.

God, this can't be good.

The others don't take notice, too focused on squabbling amongst themselves to notice their classmate in trouble. She huffs under her breath, irritated at their childishness, as she guides a woozy Imposter into the shade and away from the sun.

Mahiru jogs back to the abandoned water bottles scattered on the ground, picking them up and taking an additional two before jogging back.

She holds one of them out to Imposter, "Here, after you drink this bottle, I'll give you another one.

Take off your jacket and unbutton your shirt a little. And—" Mahiru fishes through her pockets and takes out a handkerchief, cracking open another water bottle and drenching it in ice cold water before holding it out to them, "Wipe your face with this."

Imposter wordlessly stares between the dripping handkerchief and Mahiru's concerned expression, the latter holding her breath and wondering if she made a mistake somewhere. It isn't until their hard stare softens into something like gratitude that she breathes out in relief. They finally open their mouth and let the quiet words slip, "I'm grateful, but this really isn't necessary. Besides, there's too much work left to be done."

Mahiru stares at them incredulously, "Uh? Yes, it is very much necessary. I don't know if you were aware, but you were on the verge of heat exhaustion. Any longer in the sun and you really might've fallen sick."

They don't say anything, lips pulling into a thin line and opting to take the handkerchief without another word while doing exactly as Mahiru instructed.

Time passes slowly under the shade of the overhang as the two of them wordlessly sit side by side, Mahiru keeping a careful eye out for the other and making sure that their condition isn't worsening. Bit by bit, it all started to settle - for Imposter, their heat exhaustion, and for Mahiru, her curiosity.

As their face and body cools down, a pressing question rolls around in Mahiru's mind for a minute before she hammers in her courage. Something was off with Imposter, especially with how reckless they were just now, and she wanted— no, needed to know what it was. Close or not, they were still her friend. She still wanted to capture many more moments with them.

"I don't know if it's my place to ask this, since we don't really talk and all, but... are you alright? I mean besides what happened in the heat."

Imposter looks at her quizzically, anxiously looking back at the warehouse instead of Mahiru. She can't help but immediately feel a speck of nervousness in her heart. Flustered, she tries again, "It's just that... sometimes I feel like you're taking on a much bigger load than you need to – at the cost of your own well-being sometimes. Like— like you're compensating for something you really don't need to."

"You're right," They admit, a lot quieter than Mahiru expected. Imposter laces their fingers together to keep them from fidgeting, gaze fixated on the others working cooperatively in the distance even without their direction,

"I didn't realize it myself but, perhaps I am compensating for something. But... I can't agree to the idea that I don't need to do so."

"Why?" She questions, "You're already doing enough, taking on so many responsibilities, carrying on without a single complaint. I don't... understand why or how you do it."

"I do it because I failed once before."

The silence between them stretches on for a little while, but Mahiru can't say that it's one that's awkward necessarily – just tense. Tense in the way she feels around Pekoyama but not Fuyuhiko, the latter still giving her the cold shoulder, while Pekoyama was a gaze ridden with guilt that Mahiru had already long forgiven. She knows it isn't easy.

Nothing ever is.

Even so, it's worth taking a chance on them. "If I can be honest with you, I admire you a great deal." Mahiru looks to her side, a kind expression on her face as she studies the other's serious one that undoubtedly was a mask for guilt, "I've always

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aspired to have your level of leadership. You've always been the most reliable one amongst our classmates, even more-so than Hajime most of the time."

"Most of the time?"

She laughs, "Well, he does shine in his own way, I suppose. But what I'm trying to say is that what you're doing is already enough. What you did back then was already enough. You already fulfilled your duty by protecting the class. I just think that..."

Mahiru takes a deep breath, and then out, steadying the anxiety rushing within her chest.

"I think that you should try and let your hair down a little. I mean, are you really okay with this? Living behind a mask all your life?"

Imposter's gaze falls to the floor, to the shadows dancing around the sun-scorched dirt. Their expression cracks a little, a fracture in their pristine disguise. A glimpse of their true nature. It's something that simultaneously breaks Mahiru's heart and makes it soar with hope knowing that her friend is still in there.

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"I... don't know how to do that." They laugh humorlessly, almost bitter, "I don't have a personality, an identity. Living behind a mask and bearing the weight of responsibility for those around me is all that I know, really."

Mahiru chuckles at this in their stead, earning a confused look from Imposter. "Oh, I understand responsibility. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one with a proper head on their shoulders. I get it, I do, but... you know, a little birdy once told me that life isn't all about responsibility and repentance. That there has to be a balance somewhere."

And somehow that gets their attention, in a spark of recognition at her words, which makes Mahiru's heart swell with pride. Like breathing new life into someone, or simply lending a friend a hand to lead them out of the darkness. Just like they'd done for them in the program - a steadfast figure amongst lost teenagers, a light of hope to guide them forward, protect them.

Even now, they were still protecting them, looking after them in ways that slip under everyone else's radar - everyone's except Mahiru.

After all, she knows what it's like to be in that position, to be the only one dependable enough. It wasn't until someone dear to her took her by the shoulders and shook her out of it that she learned that no, it wasn't enough to simply be reliable; she had to also learn to trust and rely on others.

That was why it was so important for her to look out for them, not only for the sake of paying it forward, but also for the sake of her old friend; to let them stretch their wings for once in their life. She smiled at them warmly, feeling overjoyed when they returned it a tad brighter than her own. She wouldn't give in again, she promised herself. She would never lose Imposter or any of her friends again.

"Well... we'd better get back to work soon."

Imposter's words broke her out of her train of thought, though the timing wasn't too off. They did abandon everything halfway through to take care of their condition, and they both still had plenty left to do. This time however, maybe she could scold some sense into the others so Imposter can have a load taken off their back. She nods to herself in determination, pushing off the wall and dusting the back of her skirt.

She pauses for a moment, looking back to Imposter still seated on the bench. Another heartfelt smile blooms on her face as she taps on their shoulder lightly, drawing their attention, before letting her hand rest there when it was met with no resistance. In the back of her mind, she realizes that Imposter really is a beautiful person, both inside and out. It's not a surprising revelation in the slightest.

"By the way, I just... wanted to say that you do have a personality - a rather charming one, really." Mahiru says with confidence that she means from the bottom of her heart. It's a personality they don't even realize they're wearing when it slips out in small, proud smiles and chides out of tough love.

She grins playfully, "You really can let your hair down every now and then, you know. It's pretty nice - I'm sure Hiyoko would love to style it one day."

Imposter smiles at her, genuine and brightly. And then they sighed exaggeratedly - playfully, not as Byakuya Togami, but as themself for the first time, "I suppose I have no choice then, do I?"

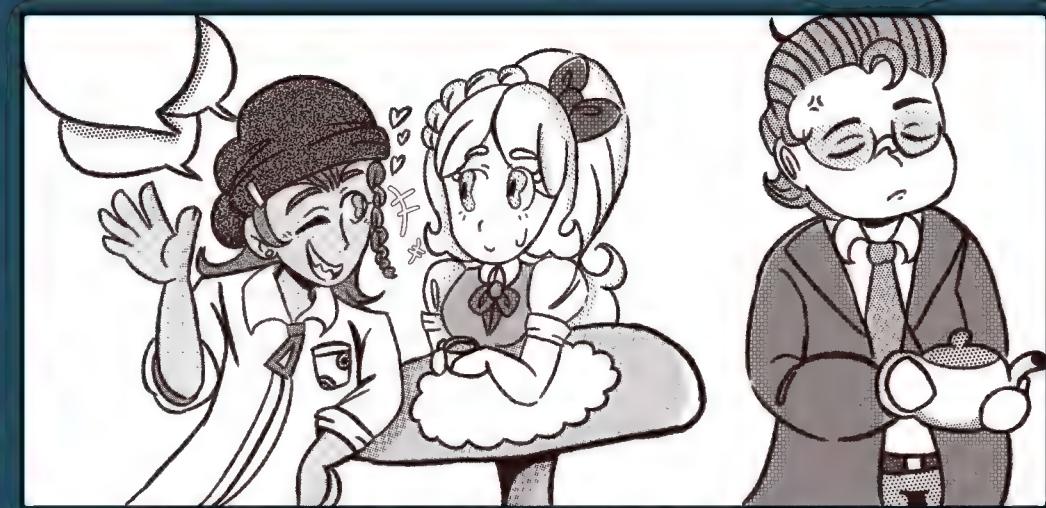
It's then, when that expression melts back into a wholehearted smile full of mirth and life,

超

高校級の「詐欺師」

that Mahiru pulls up her camera. A finger ready on the shutter button, a click, and that's all she needs to capture one of the greatest pictures she's ever taken.







Imposter Syndrome

by Punk Pitcher

Hope's Peak was always so quiet at night.

It was a little strange just how silent the usually bustling school got after sunset. With how enthusiastic and loud all of the students were, it just felt wrong for there not to be anything happening.

It wasn't like he didn't appreciate it, of course. It was hard to find a quiet place to just think besides his own room, and that could get rather stifling. So while the silence was strange, it offered the best time to walk.

That night, he found himself wandering around the barren courtyard, still fully disguised as the widely known Byakuya Togami. After all, that is who everyone in the school knew him as, and it would be bad to be caught as anyone else.

He was well aware that he couldn't keep up this disguise for much longer.

The real Byakuya Togami would be entering Hope's Peak soon. Even if there had been no confirmation of that, everyone knew it to be true. What would he do then?

Could he still keep up the act? What would his classmates think?

Sighing to himself, he glanced up at the stars.

When he was invited to attend Hope's Peak, he thought he would feel some sense of belonging. And yet, he felt more alienated than he had in his entire life. He should've known that in a place filled to the brim with people being so unabashedly themselves, an imposter wouldn't fit in.

Imposter. He had to laugh at the title he was given as an ultimate- something that only the school knew. His classmates didn't know the real him- was there even a real him anymore? Was there ever a real him to begin with? He was just a nobody.

He thought that the clear night sky would bring him enough peace to sleep, but it seemed that he was wrong.

He turned to go back to his room, but something caught his eye- a figure in the distance.

As he walked closer, he immediately identified who the figure belonged to. After all, it was hard to forget the obnoxiously bright pink hair of Kazuichi Souda. The Ultimate Mechanic was faced away from him, curled up on the grass and staring up at the night sky.

"What are you doing out this late?" He had asked when he was close enough to the other.

Kazuichi jumped with a high pitched squeal, a pair of glasses falling off of his face. He fumbled to catch them before they hit the ground. Finally, he turned to face him, glasses put back on and eyes clearly brown instead of pink. "I-I could ask you the same thing!"

They stared at each other silently for a moment, but that was enough for him to notice that Kazuichi's eyes were puffy, as if he had been crying.

"Heh, well... this is awkward." Kazuichi laughed, though it was clear that there wasn't much humor in it. "I can, uh, go... if you wa-"

"May I sit with you?" He really didn't know why he asked; it wasn't as though he had planned to stay

for much longer. Maybe it was the oddly familiar expression of the other- the look of someone who felt lost and alone.

Kazuichi stared at him for a moment, clearly surprised by the request, and who could blame him?

Byakuya Togami would never ask for permission- especially for something like this. "Uh... yeah, sure."

He couldn't say that he was the biggest fan of sitting on the ground, especially in his clean white suit, but there he was, sitting beside Kazuichi on the slightly damp grass. It didn't take long at all for an awkward silence to settle between them.

Really, he was trying to find the right way to approach Kazuichi. He wanted to know why the other was out so late, and why he was crying. It was hard to find a tactful way to bring it up.

Well, it wasn't like Byakuya Togami was known for his tact. "I didn't know that you wear contacts."

The way Kazuichi curled in on himself like a frightened hedgehog immediately told him that he chose the wrong way to go about things. Byakuya Togami wouldn't be able to relate to Kazuichi-

not that he thought he could relate any better as himself.

"What does a true self mean anyways?"

It was a question that he never expected to be asked, least of all from Kazuichi. "I'm not sure I understand what you're asking."

Kazuichi sighed, staring at the ground. "I don't know, man. Everyone always talks about being yourself as if I'm supposed to know what that means."

He... really didn't know what to say. It was as if Kazuichi was taking all of those thoughts he had himself and finally voicing them out loud. Was Kazuichi... the same as him?

"I can't say that I know what a true self is either." He admitted rather easily.

"Great." Kazuichi groaned, laying his face against his knees. "I thought if anyone would know, it'd be you."

He couldn't confirm if the real Byakuya Togami would know the answer, but he had to assume that he would.

Sadly, that was something that he wouldn't be able to replicate himself, even with his talent.

"Why do you want to know about a true self anyway?" He asked, trying to push away his genuine curiosity for Byakuya Togami's typical condescending tone.

Kazuichi stared at his knees for a long while, as if quietly contemplating his next step. He could understand Kazuichi's hesitancy, as the topic seemed to be personal to the mechanic. He didn't want to force Kazuichi to admit anything that he wasn't comfortable with.

But before he could voice any of that, Kazuichi had spoken up, "Growing up, I... always thought that everyone had my best interest in mind. That no matter what, I could trust people. Even when I was knocked down by people I thought cared about me, I kept believing."

"It's a commendable trait to have."

Kazuichi only scoffed at his attempt to comfort. "Wasn't ever a good thing to me. People used my gullibility to walk all over me. Family, bullies, teachers... even friends."

In middle school, I let my best friend cheat off me on a test, and we were found out. He put all of the blame on me, and I got in trouble. It's not like I really cared, but he just... stopped talking to me after that. I got really pissed, and decided to get rid of it all, including my looks."

"You changed yourself because your friend betrayed you?"

"Well, it was more than that, I guess. It was just my tipping point." Kazuichi scratched the back of his head nervously. "You'd be surprised how much changes when you change your looks though. Any friends that I had left started keeping their distance, and I started being surrounded by punkasses instead. But, hey... I was never betrayed again."

He always thought that Kazuichi was much like the rest of their class; the concept that the other was struggling with his own self-identity had never even crossed him. Maybe Kazuichi really was just a good actor... much like himself.

"But now I'm here, and it's so much different than my own school... than home." He heard Kazuichi sniffle.

“I just want to fit in... to belong somewhere, you know? But it feels like everyone can see right through me. I’m not whatever my true self is... I’m just an imposter.”

Imposter... the word felt ironic considering who he was talking to. But he couldn’t deny that he knew how Kazuichi felt.

And that realization alone led him to a new predicament. Should he open up to Kazuichi about his own past? Would that help? Or would it just feel like another betrayal?

The risk was worth it if it helped Kazuichi. “Suppose there is a man that was born with nothing. No name, birth certificates, family... this man was nothing.”

“Huh?” Kazuichi looked at him, head tilted in clear confusion.

“This man didn’t even have an identity of his own—there was no self.” He continued, knowing that if he stopped then he would never finish. “All this man wanted was to live a normal life. He wanted to be acknowledged like everyone else, but what could he do?”.

Kazuichi stared at him silently, curious-yet-interested eyes boring into him through thick glasses. The undivided attention almost made him want to shy away, but he knew better than that. “There was only one clear option: he had to become someone else. Lying was the only way he could live like he wanted to. Even with this, he knew that he could never have a true self. He could only take others.”

Time seemed to drone on after he finished his story. Kazuichi looked up at the sky, clearly contemplating the situation presented to him. He knew that he had to give the other some time to mull over everything he said, but he couldn’t deny the regret filling up his lungs and making it difficult to breathe.

Patience was not winning over his mind.

“You know,” Kazuichi finally said, “I think that this true self shit is stupid. I mean, if someone was born with no identity, then that doesn’t mean that they’re nobody. It doesn’t matter how convincing an act is, there’s still a bit of yourself in everything you do.”

It wasn’t an answer that he had been expecting, but the words alone still sent relief through his body, allowing himself to breathe once again.

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“What do you mean?”

Kazuichi shrugged. “I’m not, like, an artist or anything, but I once heard Mahiru talk about how she puts a bit of herself into every photo she takes, even when the subject had nothing to do with her. So that has to be the same with everyone, right?”

“I... can’t say I’ve ever thought about it like that before.”

“I mean, I guess it could be the same for me, right? No matter how hard I try, I’m still me. A scared, desperate, and broken nerd.”

If all of that was true, then what about himself? Was there a true self hidden in all of his disguises? Something that was always there no matter how hard he tried to be someone else?

“And you will always be you, yeah? Compassionate, a leader through and through, but still broken just like me.” Kazuichi smiled at him, as if he knew the reason behind his story. “Can’t say I ever thought Byakuya Togami would be like that.”

It was there, sitting side by side under the stars,

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that he felt a deep sense of connection with Kazuichi—something that he was sure neither of them would’ve expected. It was the first time that he had ever felt like he belonged somewhere. Maybe someday he could have a place beside each of his classmates.

Maybe Hope’s Peak really was a place he could belong.

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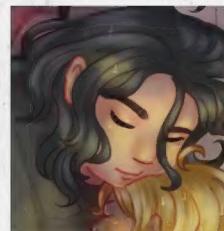
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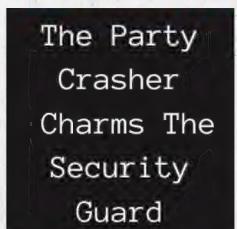
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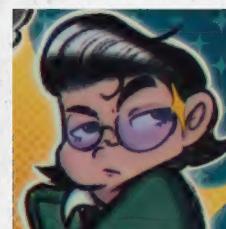
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